

Promoting the use of primary care

ISSUE: How can Medicare promote the use of primary care services?

KEY POINTS:

Enhancing access to primary care services and reducing reliance on specialty care may improve the efficiency of health care delivery without compromising quality. Research shows that areas with more specialist-oriented patterns of care are not associated with improved access to care, higher quality, better outcomes, or greater patient satisfaction (Fisher et al. 2003a, 2003b). Physicians may view primary care services as less profitable and the specialties that provide them less desirable. As such, primary care services are at risk for being underprovided to the Medicare population. Another signal that primary care services may be relatively undervalued is the steady decline in the share of U.S. medical school graduates entering family practice and primary care residency training programs. Further, FFS Medicare provides no encouragement for beneficiaries to seek care from primary care practitioners before or instead of specialists, when appropriate.

Primary care services and, perhaps more importantly, primary care physicians are critical to delivering more efficient, higher quality care to the Medicare population. This paper explores two policy initiatives for promoting the use of primary care in Medicare.

ACTION: The Commission should provide staff with input on these issues and further relevant work.

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